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C O N F I D E N T I A L ASHGABAT 000091

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/IR

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TAGS: [IR](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: IRAN: MASSHAD RESIDENTS HOPEFUL THAT "OBAMA IS WITH US"

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Sylvia Reed Curran. Reasons: 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) In a conversation with Iran Watcher this week, Ghandeem Gurbanov, a prominent Persian language scholar in Ashgabat, recounted his impressions following a recent visit to northern Iran. He was in Mashhad for several days in December to receive an award for his translation from Farsi to Turkmen of a new work on Ali Reza, the eighth Shia Imam. Gurbanov, a retired professor and language instructor at the Iranian Cultural Center, said he was amazed at the new openness of even Iranian government bureaucrats. Many of them told him that "the government's actions are totally unjustified." He said that in the more than three decades that he has been traveling to Iran, he has never heard Iranians express such blatant dislike for the regime.

OO-BAA-MAA ("HE IS WITH US")

¶2. (C) According to Gurbanov, even average citizens in Mashhad, including taxi drivers, have begun using the refrain, "Oo baa maa" (pronouncing the first syllable with an elongated "o" sound, as in "spoon"); in Farsi, literally, "He is with us." They told him, "If he (Obama) is with us, we will be victorious." Many people he encountered told him this, saying, "This regime must go."

OPPOSITION IS OUTGUNNED, IF NOT OUTNUMBERED

¶3. (C) Gurbanov, on the other hand, is skeptical about how much an opposition movement in Iran will ever achieve in the face of the regime's overwhelming security apparatus, under the control of the Supreme Leader. He said that even if most of the population supports the opposition movement (he estimates that much as 70 percent of Iranians are sympathizers), they are simply no match for and are "outgunned" by the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps and the militias it finances and controls. "Only pressure on the regime from the international community, whether financial or otherwise, will cause it to change." Nevertheless, he found that the simple residents he met, seemingly less aware of how dire the circumstances really are, were the most hopeful that change in Iran is possible, even imminent. He predicted a violent response to the opposition demonstrations reportedly planned for the "Arba'in" or fortieth day after Ashura,

commemorating the death of Imam Hussein, in early February.

IRANIAN CULTURAL CENTER: PROMOTING CONVERSION TO SHIISM

4.(C) Gurbanov said that the Iranian Embassy, which runs the cultural center (known as the "Rai Zani") in Ashgabat, has been encouraging the center's employees to convert to Shiism.

He said Iranian Embassy officials told several of the instructors, all Turkmen citizens fluent in Farsi, that they would get "better pay, better benefits, and more class hours" if they became Shia. Thus far, three young women instructors have converted, and several others approached Gurbanov asking his advice in the matter. He said he told them that it was a poor reason to change one's faith, and that, furthermore, there were no guarantees that they would actually receive what was promised.

15. (C) COMMENT: Although his passion is the Persian language, not politics, Gurbanov's instincts on Iran, honed from years of contact, have in the past been unfailingly accurate. END COMMENT.
CURRAN